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ABSTRACT

A widespread movement is underway to shift from teacher-centered toward more student-centered learning. Teachers are being encouraged to lecture less and lead more discussions, to be less directive and more facilitative. Students are being encouraged to be less passive and more participatory. In a magazine writing class, an instructor asked his students to describe the type of comments they would like to hear about the papers they had written on a personal experience. They said such things as "How did the story work as a whole?" or "Tell me what I did well." "Be specific." "This is what I want to hear most." These comments came after he joked with them by announcing first thing in the class that one of them would stand in front of the class and read his or her paper aloud. Then, the instructor informed them that members of the class would pick it to pieces and reduce the author to a quivering mass of insecurity. The result was a release of tension and an airing of feelings about why students fear participating in class. There is a method of humor that works by bringing into the open things that are unspoken, making a joke of them, and allowing people a way to decompress an inexpressible feeling. Some people use this kind of humor as a method of attack--with sarcasm. It can also be used empathetically, as a way of acknowledging that one person has "read" what another person is feeling and that it is all right. Thus, humor is an effective tool in the classroom. (TB)

(The Teaching Strategies Sharing Project)

Using Humor to Help Students Respond to One Another's Writing

by Gerald Grow

Students in my magazine article writing class had their first assignment due--the first draft of a personal experience article. We had read aloud some examples from earlier semesters and discussed the difference between a private account and an article. We had looked at some of the ways other students turned a personal, eccentric, individual moment into something readers can identify with. It was 9:05. No one looked at me as I entered the room. They sat, staring into the spaces between other students, clutching the papers they held in their laps, face down.

My plan was to have several students volunteer to read their papers aloud and have the class respond to them. I saw at once that they were not ready to do that, so I set out to do one of the simplest things that teachers do--something seldom discussed but essential--move them from the state they are in to a state in which they can learn. My first tool was humor.

"In a few minutes," I began in my dead-pan professorial voice, "we are going to do something you are all familiar with from other classes. I will select one of you to stand in front of the class and read your paper aloud. After that, members of the class will pick it to pieces, tell you what you did wrong, reduce you to a quivering mass of insecurity, then we will move on to the next victim."

Let me explain the strategy. There is a method of humor that works by bringing into the open things that are unspoken, making a joke of them, and allowing people a way to decompress an inexpressible feeling. Some people use this kind of humor as a method of attack--with sarcasm. It can also be used empathetically, as a way of acknowledging that you already "read" what the other person is feeling, that it is all right, and that you are willing to reassure them and move ahead with the conversation.

I had told students on the first day that one of the requirements of the course is that they had to laugh at my jokes. A second and harder requirement was that they had to figure out when I was joking.

After clutching his paper for a moment of shocked silence, one student tentatively asked, "Ha, ha?"

"Right!" I said, and as the class relaxed and grumbled its way out of falling for the joke, "But haven't you ever had the feeling that the teacher or the other students were responding to your writing in a way that really hurt? Or completely missed the point? Can anyone think of a time?"

They talked about times teachers misunderstood what they wrote. Times teachers ignored what they were saying and penalized them for errors in spelling and punctuation. Times they worked hard to write in a new way yet received nothing but discouraging

criticism for the effort. Times they received an "A" with no comments that helped them understand what they had done well.

This part of the discussion served the same role as the humor: to air out some of the feelings and past experiences that make students reluctant to risk participating in class or risk putting themselves forward in a personal way.

When this discussion slowed and I saw that its peak energy was spent but not exhausted, I moved toward the goal of this exercise. While they were still recalling times they received unhelpful responses to their writing, I asked, "If you get to read your paper aloud today, what kinds of responses from the class, and from me, would really help you make this a better, more effective, more complete piece of writing?"

A widespread movement is underway to shift from teacher-centered toward more student-centered learning. Teachers are being encouraged to lecture less and lead more discussions, to be less directive and more facilitative. Students are being encouraged to be less passive and more participatory. One of the better known themes is "collaborative learning"--in which groups of students learn by working on projects together or otherwise teaching one another. Collaborative learning in journalism classes is especially meaningful because, in the workplace, journalists may collaborate at any stage of a project -- idea,

focus, research, length, illustrations, organization, audience, style, etc.

In early ventures in collaborative learning, teachers assigned projects to small groups of students and gave everyone the same grade for it. Results were poor, because self-directed students did all the work while more passive learners let them. Or students were sent out in groups to learn material on their own. Again, students who had learned how to learn did well, others did not. From such experiences, teachers concluded that students have to be trained before they can collaborate on mutual projects or before they can effectively teach one another. There are some good books that help teachers lead discussions. Many students would also benefit from training in how to contribute to a class discussion.

My question--"What would really help you?" -- was a way to train students in ways to work together toward improving one another's writing, by considering what would help them with their own work. It was also a way of asking them to train me.

In the discussion that followed, students came up with pretty much what you would expect. I could have prepared a handout in advance and given them a checklist to fill out as each student read aloud. But that would have missed the point. That would have made their actions teacher-directed. The purpose of

this discussion was for them to invent helpful responses based on their experience.

After a discussion in which I facilitated--drawing out, connecting, helping them make things explicit--here are the main things these students wanted:

* How did the story work as a whole?

* Tell me what I did well. Be specific. This is what I want to hear most.

* Tell me what I did. Describe to me the main qualities you found in my article. For example, "It expresses a painful experience in beautiful but fuzzy poetic language." Or, "It is a heart-stopping, suspenseful account of a bizarre accident that stirs up feeling we can all identify with." With this kind of feedback, I (the writer) can decide whether my purpose came across.

* Tell me how I can improve the story overall--in the big sense, not in the details. If the opening is too long and slow, tell me. If you got lost in the middle, tell me. If I lingered lovingly over details you found irrelevant, tell me. If the shift back and forth between "I" and "she" confused you, tell me. If something is missing, tell me.

* I you can think of ways to make this more publishable, tell me. If this piece was to appear in a magazine, what would make it more effective? A particular title or illustration? A sidebar or two connecting the story more directly with readers or

with resources in the community? Quotes from experts about the general situation this story is an example of?

Of course, I collected the papers, read them, and returned each with directions on how I thought it needed to be revised. And I modeled my responses on what they had asked for in class.

The key moment for this assignment, though, came when a few students read their drafts aloud. Again, I used humor to bring out and burst the bubble of stage-fright: "Remember, reading your work to the class is no more difficult than walking across the stage in front of everybody to receive your diploma, stark naked."

Those reading knew what kinds of things the class and the teacher would say when they were finished, and this helped put them at ease. Class members knew what to do during the reading--they took specific notes; they wanted to be helpful, because they might be the next to read. In the critiques, I facilitated student comments and gave my own observations only after no one in the class came up with what I thought of saying, which was seldom.

Because of the time the discussion took, we were able to read even fewer papers aloud, but those that were read received a warmer, more helpful reception from students who were alert and aligned, and I think students learned something about how they can continue to help one another write better.

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